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ABSTRACT

Effective instructional approaches for dealing with stage fright can be developed by examining A. H. Buss's theory of audience anxiety. Buss argues that audience anxiety correlates with feelings of self-consciousness, characteristics of the audience, and the novelty of the speaking role. From his perspective, the experience of anxiety is divided into three time intervals: (1) evaluation anxiety, occurring days to moments before the event; (2) self-consciousness, occurring in the first one or two minutes of the presentation; and (3) awareness of the novelty of the situation when viewing the audience from a speaker's perspective. This theory is useful in three ways. First, it presents a framework for helping students to understand the experience of fear in the public speaking arena. Second, the theory helps to organize and place into a larger context some of the strategies that are often suggested for minimizing stage fright. Finally, the theory suggests some instructional strategies that instructors can use in teaching the public speaking course. These strategies include situational analysis, visualization strategies, and relaxation techniques. These approaches are most useful for the "normal presenter," that is, the public speaker who experiences nervousness but is not dysfunctional and/or cross-situational. (Appendixes consist of structured and unstructured demonstration speech assignments and common textbook suggestions of ways to reduce stage fright. Sixteen references are also attached.) (MM)

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An Instructional Approach for Minimizing Stage Fright: Insights from Buss' Theory of Audience Anxiety

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ABSTRACT

This paper draws upon Buss' (1980) theory of audience anxiety (stage fright) to outline an instructional approach for dealing with the phenomenon. Since stage fright is a pervasive phenomenon, typically experienced to different degrees by many people, this instructional approach is one which attends to the class at large rather than individuals who have been identified as communication apprehensive.

Buss (1980) offers an insightful analysis on the nature of stage fright. From his perspective, the experience of anxiety can be divided into three time intervals. First, there are the days (to moments) before the speaking performance where the speaker feels fearful from merely anticipating the performance. The second time interval is during the first one or two minutes of the presentation when the speaker's anxiety peaks due to "being in the spotlight". Finally, anxiety may continue during the presentation, but the reason is due to the novelty of the situation or newness of perspective for the speaker. This last stage of anxiety is experienced more by beginning speakers than the experienced speaker.

Audience Anxiety theory, then, becomes a useful way of delineating the speaking experience. Experiences of anxiety are organized into three comprehensible time-units. Reasons for nervousness can be more clearly operationalized and understood. Based on the theory, the paper outlines specific instructional strategies to assist beginning students with the challenges faced at each time interval.

An Instructional Approach for Minimizing Stage Fright: Insights from Buss' Theory of Audience Anxiety

That stage fright among most people is a common occurrence cannot be denied (Page, 1985). Consequently, the public speaking instructor is faced with an inevitable question: How does one teach students ways of coping with nervousness? Public speaking textbooks typically give little recourse for the teacher or student who is seeking ways to minimize anxiety. This author's cursory review of public speaking textbooks revealed only three which devoted entire chapters to the notion and treatment of stage fright (Andrews, 1985; Cohen, 1983; Gregory, 1987). Other textbooks give little attention to the issue. In addition, Ayers and Hopf (1985) have suggested that many of the systematic treatment programs for stage fright are not easily introduced into the classroom setting.

Since most students have ill-feelings about giving speeches it is desirable to develop comprehensive yet practical ways to minimize stage fright. While many of the research-based strategies and folklore suggestions for dealing with stage fright are practical, little is understood about the best ways to carry out such strategies. For instance, do we, as teachers, do our students justice when we simply tell them to know the material, practice, and teach them relaxation techniques? My students have seldom found solace in such suggestions and caveats. A more comprehensive instructional framework is needed where: (1) the student first understands the reasons for stage fright, (2) the student understands the things that can be done to minimize anxiety, and (3) instructional methods help to create feelings of comfort in the novice speakers as they experiment with public speaking skills.

This model is consistent with other communication skills training models (c.f., Clinard, 1979). A useful theory for organizing instruction about stage fright is Buss' (1980) theory of audience anxiety (stage fright). Buss (1980) argues that anxiety is correlated with feelings of self-consciousness, characteristics of the audience, and the novelty of the speaking role.

This paper seeks to apply Buss' theory of audience anxiety in three ways. First, it is proposed that Buss (1980) presents a parsimonious framework for helping students to understand the experience of fear in the public speaking arena. Second, the theory of audience anxiety helps to organize and place into a larger context some of the strategies that are often suggested for minimizing stage fright. Finally, the theory suggests some instructional strategies that instructors can use in teaching the public speaking course. Since stage fright is a pervasive phenomenon, typically experienced to different degrees by many people, the suggestions outlined in this paper are ones which attend to the class at large rather than individuals who have been identified as communication apprehensive.

Buss' Theory of Audience Anxiety

Buss (1980) offers an insightful analysis on the nature of stage fright. From his perspective, the experience of anxiety can be divided into three time intervals. The first time interval is characterized by evaluation anxiety, which may occur from days to moments before the event. During this time frame, fear of being evaluated and perhaps rejected by one's audience permeates the speaker's mind. The degree of fear may be related to the characteristics of the audience (e.g., status, familiarity, size).

According to Buss (1980), this stage of anxiety is the most difficult to control because of the general fear of failure. Anxiety is experienced from merely anticipating the upcoming performance. Referring to speakers' pre-performance fears Buss contends that, "Their concern is with how well they will perform. And they will continue to experience this evaluation anxiety until they are eventually reassured by positive feedback from audiences or their own recognition of success", (1980, p.175). Even "seasoned" performers will experience anxiety before an event when there is uncertainty about the speaking requirements or expectations of a negative audience (Daly & Buss, 1984).

The second stage in Buss' view of audience anxiety involves the first one or two minutes of the presentation. This is perhaps the point where anxiety peaks. Self-consciousness is the stimulus for the anxiety. As Buss writes,

> When a person rises to speak, he immediately becomes conspicuous. The audience scrutinizes his appearance and behavior, inducing an intense awareness of himself as a social object. As long as he remains in this state of acute public self-awareness, he will remain at a peak level of audience anxiety. (1980, P. 175)

Since the speaker is aware of himself as a social object, concerns to "save face" become paramount (c.f., Schlenker & Leary, 1982). Inexperienced speakers will often choose to remain behind a lectern or some other prop (Daly & Buss, 1984). Yet, the source of anxiety will change if the speaker shifts his focus from self to the content of the speech.

That is to say that the third time interval in Buss' theory is the novelty of the situation, which may continue to promote levels of anxiety even after self-consciousness is reduced. This last time interval especially affects beginning speakers who are not use to viewing an audience from a speaker's perspective. Also, certain speaking situations (or audience profiles) might be new to an experienced speaker -- for instance, the audience size or status. Such novelty has a way of prompting anxiety (Daly & Buss, 1984). According to Buss (1980), once the speaker becomes accustom to the role and perspective, anxiety is alleviated.

Audience anxiety theory, then, becomes a useful way of delineating the speaking experience. Experiences of anxiety are organized into three comprehensible time-units and thus, reasons for nervousness can be more clearly operationalized and understood. By explaining this theory to public speaking students we can help them understand the pervasiveness and complexity of stagefright. Moreover, from the theory, specific instructional strategies can be deduced to help speakers cope with the challenges faced at each time interval. The concern of the paper now turns to these strategies.

Instructional Strategies

Buss (1980) argues that the experience of anxiety is one that is reduced backwards in the three part time interval. In other words, anxiety becomes minimal during the latter parts of the speech as speakers become accustomed to speaking before groups. Further, experienced speakers will eventually learn to manage the self-consciousness which occurs during the initial moments of the performance, and finally, the anxiety associated with anticipating

the performance (evaluation anxiety) is the last to be controlled. With this in mind, the instructor needs to incorporate an instructional appoach that will: (1) acclimate students to the speaking role, (2) minimize the influences of self-consciousness, and (3) minimize pre-performance "butterflies". Specific strategies are outlined below according to each time-interval.

Third Time Interval Strategies

The stimulus for anxiety during this time period is novelty or newness of perspective for the speaker. Beginning speakers need frequent opportunities to speak so that they may begin to feel comfortable in the role of speaker. Nonevaluative (ungraded) and progressively challenging speaking experiences are useful for beginning the acclimation process. The overriding goal of such experiences is to get the student use to speaking before a group. Frequent is the case when students are given a graded speech assignment and are given few (if any) structured speaking experiences before the assignment is due. There are many resources which are useful for structuring nonthreatening experiences (see for instance, Dubner & Mills, 1984; Bytwerk, 1985; Stewart, 1983).

Second Time Interval

Self-consciousness is the impetus for anxiety during this portion of one's presentation. Specifically, the first minute or two, according to Buss, makes one very aware of him/herself as being in the spotlight. A way to minimize the experience is to shift the cognitive focus away from one's self (Buss, 1980). The following instructional approaches can assist students in overcoming self-consciousness.

1. Special emphasis should be placed on teaching the student about situational analysis. Nothing makes one more self-conscious than to experience the unexpected. For instance, one arrives at his/her speaking engagement and finds that a lectern is not available, that a microphone will be used, or that the audience is larger than anticipated. Having to adapt to unexpected circumstances will not only induce evaluation anxiety, but the anxiety is likely to become magnified in the early part of the presentation. It is imperative that the student learn the kinds of questions to ask when planning a speech so that all possible mishaps are obviated.

2. Principles of what constitutes an effective introduction should be covered before the first major speech assignment. A concern that I have heard expressed by many beginning students is "how should I start?" Such a concern might be treated lightly by the instructor who will cover the topic in more detail during a later unit in the course. Instead, the concern of how to introduce a speech should be treated comprehensively, so that the student feels confident during the most critical part of the presentation -- the beginning.

3. Finally, it is helpful to place visualization strategies (Ayers & Hopf, 1985) in a specific context. Students can learn how to concentrate their visualization on particular portions of the presentation; in this case, it would be the introduction of the speech. Visualization scripts which detail the few moments before the speech and then the introduction itself could prove to be beneficial. As the speaker gains experience, however, these strategies may be less helpful (Ayers & Hopf, 1985).

First Time Interval

Evaluation anxiety is the major malaise of this time interval. Speakers fear the audience's evaluation (Ayers, 1986). It is typically this type of anxiety at which many instructional suggestions and caveats are aimed. Outlined below are some of these along with additional suggestions.

1. Written feedback should be given to the student after every speaking assignment (graded and ungraded). This feedback is particularly useful when it: (1) is given immediately after the assignment (Dedmon, 1967), and (2) especially with early assignments, emphasizes what the student is doing right. Daly and Buss (1984) contend that rewarding experiences tend to reduce levels of anxiety. Simply put, the student needs to realize, through feedback, the extent to which s/he is succeeding. That is not to say, however, that weaknesses should be ignored. Obviously, the phrasing of comments will affect the interpretation of negative criticism.

2. Graded assignments should be adequately structured so as to reduce uncertainty about the assignment yet still allow for creativity (Booth-Butterfield, 1986). As Booth-Butterfield concludes in her work:

> This study and supporting literature indicate that anxious students' performances may benefit from fully guided assignments. Students who are not apprehensive, however, do not need extensive structure and may communicate less competently under highly structured conditions. (p. 347)

Based on her findings, Booth-Butterfields argues for the need to

provide students with both structured and unstructured versions of the assignment. The more anxious students are then given an opportunity to reduce uncertainty, while the more confident students will not feel stifled. Appendix I contains structured and unstructured versions of a demonstration speech.

3. Many public speaking textbooks contain seemingly trite suggestions and caveats for minimizing anxiety. Such suggestions as know the topic, practice, etc. are useful when placed in the context of audience anxiety theory. Lecture and discussion of these "tips" need to be grounded in the theory to be of any substance. Appendix II contains a more complete list of the common suggestions that are often found in a public speaking textbook.

4. Providing the speaker with information regarding the audience's expectations of the speech may also helped to reduce evaluation anxiety (Ayers, 1986). Ayers explains stage fright from a social comparison perspective. He found that stage fright was typically reduced when the speaker was shown evidence that the audience's expectations of performance were not higher than the speaker's own expectations (i.e., we often set higher standards for ourselves). Ayers (1986) offers an efficient means for gathering data about one's audience. It has been argued, however, that advanced knowledge can provoke anxiety when the speaker is made aware that the audience holds an opposing point of view regarding the topic (Daly & Buss, 1984).

5. Finally, relaxation techniques such as visualization (Ayers & Hopf, 1985) and systematic desensitization (Friedrich & Goss, 1984) have been found to reduce anxiety. These strategies, however,

become useful only when coupled with some of the other strategies that have been outlined to this point and most importantly, when the relaxation techniques are grounded in sound skills training.

Conclusion

This paper has applied Buss' (1980) theory of audience anxiety to suggest practical instructional strategies for teaching beginning students about stagefright and minimizing its effects in the classroom setting. It should be emphasized that this approach is most useful for what Page (1985) has called the "normal presenter", which represents the public speaker who experiences nervousness but it is not dysfunctional and/or cross-situational. Page's reference to the "phobic presenter", on the other hand, represents a person who is being influenced by dispositional traits such as low self-esteem, shyness, or acute public self-consciousness (Buss, 1980). The presence of these personality traits in a student present a different dilemma for the public speaking instructor.

Nevertheless, few "phobic presenters" find their way to a course in public speaking. Thus, the instructor's puzzle is to identify ways to effectively help students cope with what seems to be a normal experience -- stagefright. The instructional approach outlined in this paper seems to be a comprehensive yet practical way to begin approaching such instructional efforts.

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Appendix I
Structured and Unstructured Demonstration Speech Assignment

Structured Version *

You are to plan, prepare, and deliver a 5-6 minute demonstration speech. Explain how to do something or how something works. The information in Chapter 3, Selecting a Topic and Purpose, and Chapter 4, Analyzing the Audience, should be helpful in preparing for this.

In your speech you should accomplish the following:

I. The process should be explained in steps, parts, or stages. The audience should be able to understand the process of the subject matter from start tp finish without backtracking on your part.

II. Devise your outline by indicating individual steps as main points (I, II, etc.) and explanation of these steps as supporting points (A, B, 1, 2, a, b, etc.) Express main points as sentences; express support points as phrases or key words. Refer to your handouts on outlining and on the elements of an effective speech.

III. Hand in a copy of your outline to the instructor before speaking.

Topics that lend themselves well to "how to speeches" are process topics:

A. physical activities (kicking a soccer ball, warm up exercises for jogging, the backhand serve in tennis);

B. hobbies (ceramics, personalize with painting, model rockets);

C. repair skills (fix holes in sheetrock, hang wall paper, refinish furniture);

D. job ta Shyness, Reticence, and Communication Apprehension (pp. 173 criteria will be discussed during the class period before the speech is due.

Unstructured Version

You are to plan, prepare, and deliver a 5-6 minute demonstration speech. Explain how to do something or how something works. The information in Chapters 3 and 4 should be helpful in preparing this assignment.

In your speech you should accomplish the following:

I. Completely explain each step, part, or stage of the process.

II. Devise an outline for your speech.

III. Hand in a copy of the outline to the instructor before speaking.

In addition, Chapter 13 provides useful information on the nature of this kind of speech. Please refer to that chapter for ideas.

Your grade for this assignment will be a maximum of 50 points. The criteria will be discussed the class period before the speech is due.

* The structure version of this speech is adapted from a class assignment given by Patricia Spence at Richland College

Appendix II
Common Textbook Suggestions of Ways to Reduce Stagefright

1. Realize that fear is a perfectly natural and common experience.
2. Choose a topic of interest to you and develop the desire to share it.
3. Prepare thorougly.
4. Familiarize yourself with the speaking environment.
5. Work up and introduction and know it well.
6. Practice. Try to simulate a realistic environment.
7. Practice relaxation exercises such as controlled, deep breathing.
8. Use visual aids to call attention away from yourself.
9. Take your time starting the speech.
10. Act poised and put on an air of confidence.